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EFFORT VS. ACCOMPLISHMENT

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At the October meeting of the English section held in connection with the Santa Clara County, California, Institute, a discussion arose concerning the desirability of some uniform system in grading. Pupils who transfer from one school to another complain with bitterness because their marks are not so high as formerly. Sometimes even in passing from year to year in the same school this discrepancy occurs; those whose papers were wont to receive the plaudit "A" bewail the injustice which ranks as only "C" what they feel to be work of the same quality. Hence arises trouble for both pupil and teacher; lack of harmony, of sympathy, of fellowship in aim prevents that *esprit de corps* without which satisfactory school work is difficult, if not impossible. The discussion resulted in an attempt to get together in this matter. A committee was appointed which sent out the following questions to every teacher of English in the county:

At the last meeting of the High-School English Section, a discussion arose relative to the present uncertain and variable methods of indicating grades; some uniformity at least seemed desirable, else pupils will continue to go with an "A" grade under one teacher to be grievously afflicted with a "C" under another. The discussion crystallized in the appointment of a committee to secure information with a view to establishing, if possible, some definite standard for the "B," or accrediting mark.

Since many schools require but two years of English, it was judged best to limit the inquiry to cover attainment at the end of the sophomore year.

The committee invites the earnest co-operation of every English teacher in Santa Clara County, since a wide and accurate knowledge of conditions as they are must afford the only warrant for any generalization regarding conditions as they may be.

Will you, then, answer as fully (and as speedily) as possible, the following questions, making such other comments as seem to you suggestive?

Will you also grade the accompanying papers, as you would grade those of your own pupils, putting no marks on the papers, but sending grades direct to the committee and forwarding the papers according to the order specified?

The committee is anxious to have its results tabulated in time for a report at the April meeting.

The consensus of opinion in the committee is that the following requirements may be exacted as essential to a "B" grade at the end of the sophomore year:

ESSENTIALS OF COMPOSITION

1. Handwriting must be neat, legible, and uniform.
2. Spelling of words in ordinary use must be correct.
3. Capitalization must conform to accepted rules.
4. Punctuation must be observed for making the language intelligible.
5. Sentences must be grammatically correct in construction and must conform to the principles of clearness, unity, and variety.
6. Paragraphs must indicate divisions of thought.
7. In your opinion is this requirement fair?.....
too much?..... Too little?
8. What would you add if anything?
9. What would you subtract?
10. If changes seem advisable, will you give reason for the alteration?

A genuine set of papers was mailed in Round Robin fashion, the papers to be graded and grades forwarded to the committee but not marked on the manuscripts.

Nearly all the teachers in the county sent in answers to the questions and all but two marked the papers. The results obtained, although, of course, owing to the small area covered, incapable of inducing very broad generalizations, yet afford certain interesting matters for thought.

In the first place, all unhesitatingly agreed with the consensus of opinion in the committee with respect to the first four questions. On the fifth question, especially on the last item, "Variety in sentence structure," there were slightly differing views, several taking the ground that variety in any broad sense was not to be

expected of second-year pupils; therefore two wished to omit this requirement, while one would substitute a definite statement of the degree required in "Unity, variety, and clearness." On the other hand, one would exact more, but modifies by saying: "Possibly *if* the pupils came into the high school with more adequate command of written English, they could be taught in two years to avoid certain fundamental errors. These are: dangling modifiers, punctuating a dependent sentence element as an independent sentence, and the comma fault.

It was, however, in grading the papers that the significance of the investigation was revealed. Notwithstanding the fact that the teachers were unanimous in saying that for a B grade there

TABLE I
TABULATION OF GRADES

No. of Paper	Grades Awarded by Teachers										
1	C	C	C	C	D	D	D	D	C+	D	C
2	E	C	D	D	D	D	C-	C	C-	C-	D
3	A	B	B+	C	C	C	B	B?	B+	D-	B
4	B	B	B	B	C	C	C	B+	A-	C-	B
5	D or E	C	C or D	B?	C	D	D	C	C-	D	D
6	C	C	C	B	C	C	C	C	C-	D	C
7	A	B	B	B	C	C+	D	C	B+	C+	C
8	D	C	C- or D	C	C	C	C	C	C+	D+	D
9	B+	B	B	B+	B+	C	B	B+	C-	B+	A-

must be correctness in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, penmanship, the first four requirements, yet several graded as B or even as A papers manifestly deficient in these qualities. On only three papers was the grading approximately uniform. These, as will be seen by a reference to Table I, were Nos. 1, 2, and 8, which were considered by all to be below recommending grade; the degree of failure ranged, however, from the conditioning D through the merely passing C required for graduation. The writer of paper No. 2 was estimated by one teacher as even unfit to continue with the class, being marked E, =failure. But what shall we say of a standard in considering the results of No. 3? These marks

range from A to D—! Who shall decide when doctors disagree! No. 4 shows only a little less variation, seven teachers recommending (one even marking A—), four merely passing. No. 5 shows a fair degree of uniform rating: three C's, two C—'s, five D's, but one B (however, with a question mark), all practically concurring that the paper represents failure. No. 6 is happier (?): one B, one D, but nine C grades being given. No. 7 ranges from A to D! No. 9 shows a practical vote for recommending, with only two dissentient C's.

Now this variation may well give us pause. Hardly is it to be supposed that these teachers do not know the difference between good work and poor; that they are lacking either in judgment or in discrimination. Their comments, which are gravely significant, seem to illuminate the whole matter and reveal the true crux.

One says: "Although I have tried to grade these papers as I should if they were those of my own pupils, yet I am conscious that if they were my pupils and *if I knew the personality back of the paper*, I should probably grade differently." Another says: "My grades are not very high because I graded the papers *on their intrinsic merits*. In grading papers of my own pupils *other factors enter into my judgment*; if I can see in the papers of my pupils sufficient effort and improvement to warrant my belief that they will be capable of writing English of a B grade by the time they are through high school, I do not feel justified in withholding the university recommendation. To give them only C's fatally discourages them." A third: "If I feel that a truly honest attempt has been made, I do not fail to give a satisfactory mark. I consider the habit of making a success the most important thing to be acquired in school; therefore *I modify my requirements* and think a long time before I brand anything a failure." The italics are my own.

Here, I feel, we reach a basic principle. These teachers are perfectly conscientious and honest in their conviction that the actual mark depends on elements other than technical correctness. Moreover, it is safe to say that nearly all teachers of English in the United States would probably agree with the teachers of this county that the standard is fair, not too much to be reasonably

expected, and quite possible of attainment by many. That some teachers are not willing to exact it of all, letting those who fail receive the rank of failure, connotes also their agreement with this attitude that excellence is not absolute, but relative, that effort should receive the same material reward as achievement.

This view is so widespread and works to such definite results that, although not wishing to dogmatize, rather sincerely hoping that some other readers of the *English Journal* may be inspired to enter into the discussion, since we all seek the truth to set us free, I should like to present a few reflections as they occur to me in this connection.

In the first place, if the coveted rank can be won by imperfection, what incentive is there to further striving? With the goal attained, why press on? Again, does not this pay for undelivered goods savor somewhat of dishonesty? Will it not raise false expectations that may later lead to bitter disillusionment and distress, as the victim of a misplaced sympathy realizes that such is not the way of the world? And is not the way of the world fairer on the whole? We no longer trade with the stores that have a sliding scale of prices: "One price to all" is the only motto that enlists our support in the busy marts. Why not in the school-room? Some will say that the personal equation enters largely into our transactions with our pupils, that it can never be a negligible factor. This is quite true; in any fine relation between teacher and taught the element of personality must modify the result by a gain in sympathy, understanding, kindly tolerance, help, and inspiration. But why should this necessitate any false valuation? I order a cartload of potatoes from a farmer; he arrives at my door without the commodity but with a pitiful tale: "My horse was feeble; my cart broke down; the potatoes, few in number because my ground was poor, because I was not well enough to cultivate, not rich enough to fertilize, have been spilled and lost." Now, being a sympathetic person, I am truly sorry; his distress wrings my heart. But do I pay him full price for the potatoes? Would it be just to pay? He tried. Our pupils try—some of them. Should we pay for effort or for accomplishment? No, I sympathize with him, encourage him to try again,

and send him away with a fresh grip on Fate, determined to bring me a full load of potatoes, knowing that when he delivers the goods I will pay him. I thereby keep his respect and incidentally my own. Shall we not be equally mindful of our intellectual integrity?

This theory of the effort being deserving of material reward is not confined to the department of English. Even in mathematics, where, if ever, we might expect an absolute standard, we find this same sense of relative values. I heard formerly of an algebra teacher who always gave credit if a pupil said he had worked a certain time, regardless of whether the correct answer was obtained or not. And a rather unusually good science teacher said to me once: "That pupil doesn't know much about the subject, but she has tried so hard that I marked her C. It was a gift, so far as knowledge went, but I considered it a reward for perseverance." Is this wise? Is it right? Is it truly just?

Does it never occur to these kindly disposed teachers that the reward for effort is not material, but spiritual? That, indeed, effort is its own reward and need not be estimated solely in terms of tangible compensation? Effort and accomplishment equal just the sum of effort and accomplishment, and are always greater than effort alone. But the struggle, the hard work, the purposeful attempt, result in a no less definite gain and are beyond measure encouraging to the zealous youth. Why do you cheapen values for him by making him believe that it does not matter whether he is illiterate or not if only he has "tried so hard"? As long as, in spite of his striving, he remains illiterate, why not help him to face the hard fact? What possible good will it do him to believe himself better than he is? Is it not, all things considered, fairer to say, frankly and courageously: "My dear fellow, I know you have tried, and I glory in your pluck. Every effort that you make helps you onward toward the goal. One day, I believe, you are going to arrive. Keep on, man! Up and at it!" Is not this bracing of the spirit for the eternal struggle far more wholesome than the lowering of his standards? than branding as success what is really failure? He knows, even better than you do, that he does not do good work; he knows that others have really

achieved where he has not; in his heart, unless a long course of unearned marks has so cheapened his sense of honesty that he can no longer distinguish values, he knows that you are not fair, either to the others or to him. "But he will be discouraged"? Well, perhaps I am hard-hearted, but I confess to scant sympathy with the quitter. He who would give up after one failure or even two hundred seems to me to have little moral stamina. If a boy has to be cajoled into salvation, I am frequently tempted to feel that he is not worth saving. And if we gently but firmly refuse to pay for anything but delivery of the goods, he at least carries away from his disaster a respect for things above him, a respect that is an essential basis for education.

A further justification offered by those who give high grades for a poor workmanship is that, as content is excellent, lack of form should be ignored. Now, I respectfully submit that the student who is clever enough to attain a real mastery over thought is clever enough to learn its expression, *if it is worth while*. But, manifestly, it is not worth while if he can succeed equally well without it. At any rate, inasmuch as we have met with signal failure by considering his frequent lapses from legitimate English composition as negligible aberrations, I must confess to a "satiable curiosity" to see what would happen if we marked all papers "strictly on their merits." I predict, as an ultimate result, quite a surprise for the advocates of leniency. Many a woodchuck (who is now supposed to be handicapped by nature) would climb the tree with astonishing agility.

In all seriousness, let us ask ourselves the question: "Is it not possible that, to a much more dangerous extent than has been imagined, the failure of our schools to 'make good' is due to this emasculation of standard?" The little child begins the primary grade, eager, full of zeal, rating himself at our valuation. Without tracing all the steps of his educational progress, for that, as Kipling says, is another story, let us consider him when he arrives at the high school, too often listless, aimless, intolerable in his self-satisfaction. Unless we can find some spur to endeavor, he will remain careless, indifferent to the lure of knowledge. Will this spur be afforded by a variable marking system? Why do we fail to

recognize that the truest kindness to those who have been beggared is to restore their lost ideals, to win them to respect for achievement, to make something in the intellectual life worth while, an end only to be reached by strenuous effort? This is the part of a real and wise sympathy, of large and genuinely tender encouragement.

If proof were needed that greater fairness and superior inspiration lie in the invariable standard, we may find it ready to our hand in athletics. No amount of mere effort and goodwill finds the boy a place on the first team; he has to succeed, to play the game with superior skill, to "come through." Even when he ends his race exhausted, fainting as a result of strenuous effort, he does not win the victor's reward unless he is first to breast the tape. Not the attempt, but the accomplishment, breaks the record and sets the measure for future achievement. The quitter, the whiner for sympathy, finds no favor in this athletic world of the absolute standard; effort is valued only as it fits a man for success, and in all this vigorous insistence on performance as the only legitimate claim to merit neither the boy nor his mates find anything unfair.

Vitiating to the moral and intellectual atmosphere as is this relative valuation in any subject, in English it spells disaster—practical, definite, and complete. Power to use the mother-tongue with clearness, force, accuracy is a large factor of success in life, no matter what one's field of endeavor; hence it follows that the illiterate enters the race with a heavy handicap. He can hardly hope to overcome the difficulties that beset his path unless we, his English teachers, have given him sufficient equipment. Now, since the colleges, business men, society in general, and Mr. Edward W. Bok in particular bear witness with united voice that we do not give this equipment, it behooves us to seek the cause and the remedy. Fundamentally, the reason for any failure, I'm inclined to think, lies in ourselves, not in external circumstances. We teachers of English, then, should look within to see whether in the final analysis we have not ourselves to blame for the acknowledged condition. Not that the teachers of English do not work with untiring zeal; that they do not burn the midnight electricity

to an impoverishing extent while they vainly blue-pencil the weak and admonish the erring; that they are not in many cases splendidly able with both knowledge and resource; that they do not have far more in numbers and classes than they can possibly teach; that they do not wear themselves out in the struggle: all these are reasons, rather than causes, and a thousand reasons do not necessarily excuse from responsibility as measured by results. If, however, we maintained with steadiness what we know to be at least a minimum standard; if we consistently refused to call black, white, or even gray; if we insisted on achievement as proof of effort, would the public have so much just reason to complain that those who leave us are illiterate?

This whole question of grades, then, becomes ethical, far-reaching, tremendously significant, involving, as it does, the eternal verities. In the strenuous theology of our forefathers good intentions were not regarded as commendable. Quite the contrary, in fact, since of them was laid the foundation for the abode of the unrighteous. Is there not deep truth in this old saying? Is not the path to destruction made smooth by the well-meaning but futile efforts accepted in lieu of the deed well done? What is perdition but loss of the absolute good? And is not the absolute good the embodiment of honor, truth, justice, with whom "is no variableness neither shadow of turning"?